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FOR EAP/MTS AND DRL - JANE KIM

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [MY](#)
SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT DENIES LICENSE RENEWAL FOR TAMIL
LANGUAGE NEWSPAPER

Classified By: Classified By: Classified by: Political Section Chief Mark D. Clark for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (C) Summary. The Home Ministry has denied renewal of the publication permit for the Tamil language newspaper "Makkal Osai" (Voice of the People). The Ministry provided no explanation, but the paper was a vocal critic of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and its President Samy Vellu. The paper is appealing the decision and asking the Ministry to reconsider. A senior member of MIC tells us the permit will be renewed if the paper agrees to toe the government line and provide less space for the opposition. Days after refusing Makkal Osai's permit, Home Minister Syed announced a proposal that would remove the annual requirement to renew permits. At the same time, he announced the issuance of a permit to the opposition People's Justice Party's (PKR) bi-weekly paper, which PKR has published without a permit since June 2005. While Syed's announcements are welcome, the Government nevertheless would retain the legal authority, which cannot be challenged in court, to close any publication at any time by revoking its permit. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The Home Ministry did not renew the publication permit of the Tamil language newspaper Makkal Osai (Voice of the People) effective April 17, 2008, but stated no reasons for the refusal. Under Malaysia's Printing and Publication Act 1984, all print media must obtain and annually renew a permit with the Home Ministry. The Ministry can restrict or ban outright any publication considered "likely to be prejudicial to public order, morality, security"; "likely to alarm public opinion"; or "likely to be prejudicial to national interest." Defending the government's decision, Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar maintained that the newspaper breached media guidelines governing the publication of newspapers in the country, adding that newspapers should not raise sensitive issues that "could threaten racial harmony and the country's stability." Although Syed did not specify which guidelines were breached, he denied that the non-renewal was a result of the newspapers' pro-opposition leanings. The paper has submitted a letter to the Home Ministry appealing the decision.

¶3. (C) Makkal Osai, operating since 1992, has a circulation of 52,000 to 98,000 during weekends. One of three Tamil language dailies here, it was a thorn in the side of long-time MIC President Samy Vellu, highlighting the Indian community's problems and criticizing MIC for not doing enough to help. Samy had singled out "Makkal Osai" as one of the reasons for MIC's dismal performance in the election, including his own defeat. Samy's family owns the competing "Tamil Nesan" and significantly influences the other remaining Tamil daily, "Malaysian Nanban." Veteran MIC leader Mahalingham told poloffs the "shortsighted" decision to shut down the paper would only further anger the Indian

community. He added that Makkal Osai could probably have its permit renewed by agreeing to toe the government line and provide less space for opposition news. He said the negative publicity generated by the ban and continuing local Indian resentment regarding the government's decision has prompted authorities to revisit the issue.

¶4. (SBU) On April 19, Syed announced that the government might relax conditions for renewing publication permits for newspapers. In an interview with a local English language paper, Syed said the Cabinet would discuss his proposal to issue permits only once and remove the annual renewal requirement. Syed also announced Ministry approval for publication of the newspaper of PKR, Anwar Ibrahim's opposition party. The Ministry previously denied a permit for the opposition party's bi-weekly paper, which PKR has published without a permit since June 2005.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: While Syed's announcements are welcome, even if his proposal is approved, the Government would still retain the legal mechanisms to close any publication at any time by revoking its permit. Such decisions by the Home Ministry cannot be challenged in court.

KEITH